

what they saw: a photographic exploration of self and gender

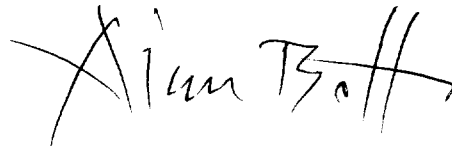
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

J. Meeks-Johnson

Thesis Advisor

Aimee Bott

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Aimee Bott". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping "A" and a long, horizontal stroke at the end.

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May 1999

nobody saw me

(just my body

and what they saw of it

was empty)

by J. Meeks-Johnson

I find myself between. Our society is built of rocks and hard places. There is no place for me. There is no easy answer. I try to force categories onto myself, looking for a label, for definition, a slot within the structure. I force myself to take on roles that I can never fill, wearing masks of a person I will never be.

But the opposite is nothing. Ethereal. Disappearing. I chase after it like a shadow, a ghost. Looking in the mirror I find myself facing a phantom I don't recognize. We both look scared.

Nobody sees the real me (not even me) and so, neither will you. But as my search reveals glimpses, yours will be rewarded with the same. Here they are—for now.

Perhaps viewing the fragments of *my* struggle will in some way assist you with your own.

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This project culminated in a photographic installation composed of five pieces. Every aspect of the show was carefully thought out. The juxtaposition of light and shadow, of concrete structure and things of a more dissolving, intangible nature were essential. As a viewer entered the gallery space, she walked between a large white wall and a bright light, casting a shadow which followed her into the first piece.

The first piece was a series of five black boxes, each with a pair of proofsheets at its back. Viewers explored both the photographs and the varied surface treatment of the boxes with the aid of small flashlights which were hung by fishing line from the supports on which the boxes rested. These boxes were a way of reflecting the structure requirements of our society—everything in its place and everything must have a label. But not all of us fit into those little boxes. . .

Two pieces were projected kodaliths (photographs developed on film, similar to acetate but with a greater contrast range.) I felt a connection with the transient nature of the projected image. Viewers could walk between the light and the wall and become a part of the image. The photographs themselves were moved by their passage. These images were not concrete but rather out of reach, *beyond* grasp. But these pieces only reflect an absence of solidity, they do not provide answers.

Another piece was composed of three photo cubes stacked pyramidically on a black shelf and lit from above. Each box had a photograph on its back wall. I chose the clear cubes as another way to visually represent the contrast between the structure of the black boxes and the intangibility of the kodaliths.

The last piece was composed of three 11" x 16" kodaliths hung horizontally as if on a clothesline. These pieces were double images—the viewer saw both the image and its sharp shadow at once. A figure was shown in each with a hand in front of its face. The first was shown with its hand *covering* its face. The second was peeking from between the fingers. In the final image, the figure closes its eye—choosing not to see.

This project gave me the opportunity to explore my self, my gender, my place or lack thereof within the structure of society through photography. I feel that it was successful both as an exhibition and as a process.



*nobody saw me (just my body and what they saw of it was empty) nobody saw me (just my body
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empty) nobody saw me (just my body and **what they saw** of it was empty) nobody saw me (just my
body and **what they saw** of it was empty)*

what they saw

an installation

~honors thesis by J. Meeks-Johnson~

Gallery 4

Elliot Hall

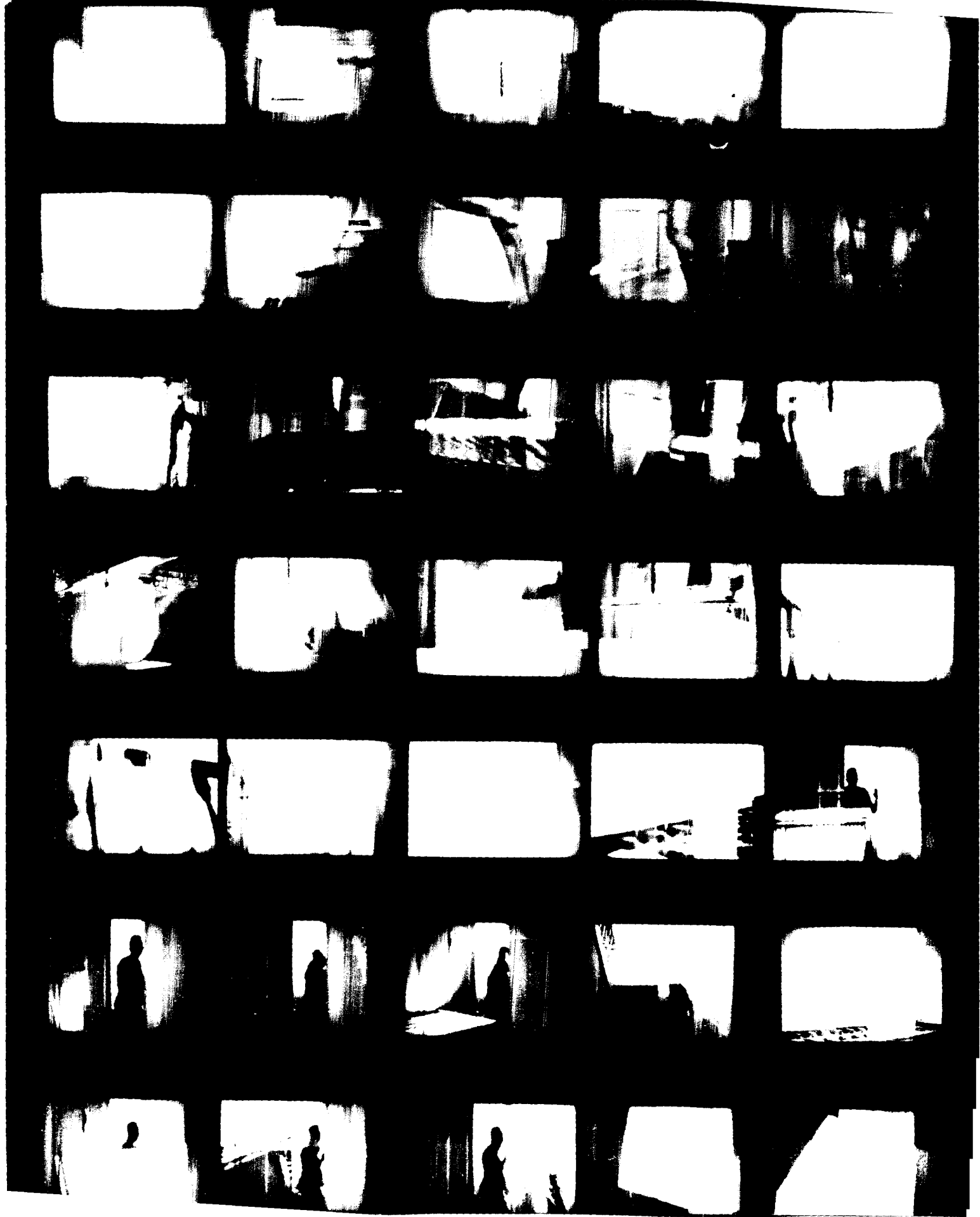
April 12-18

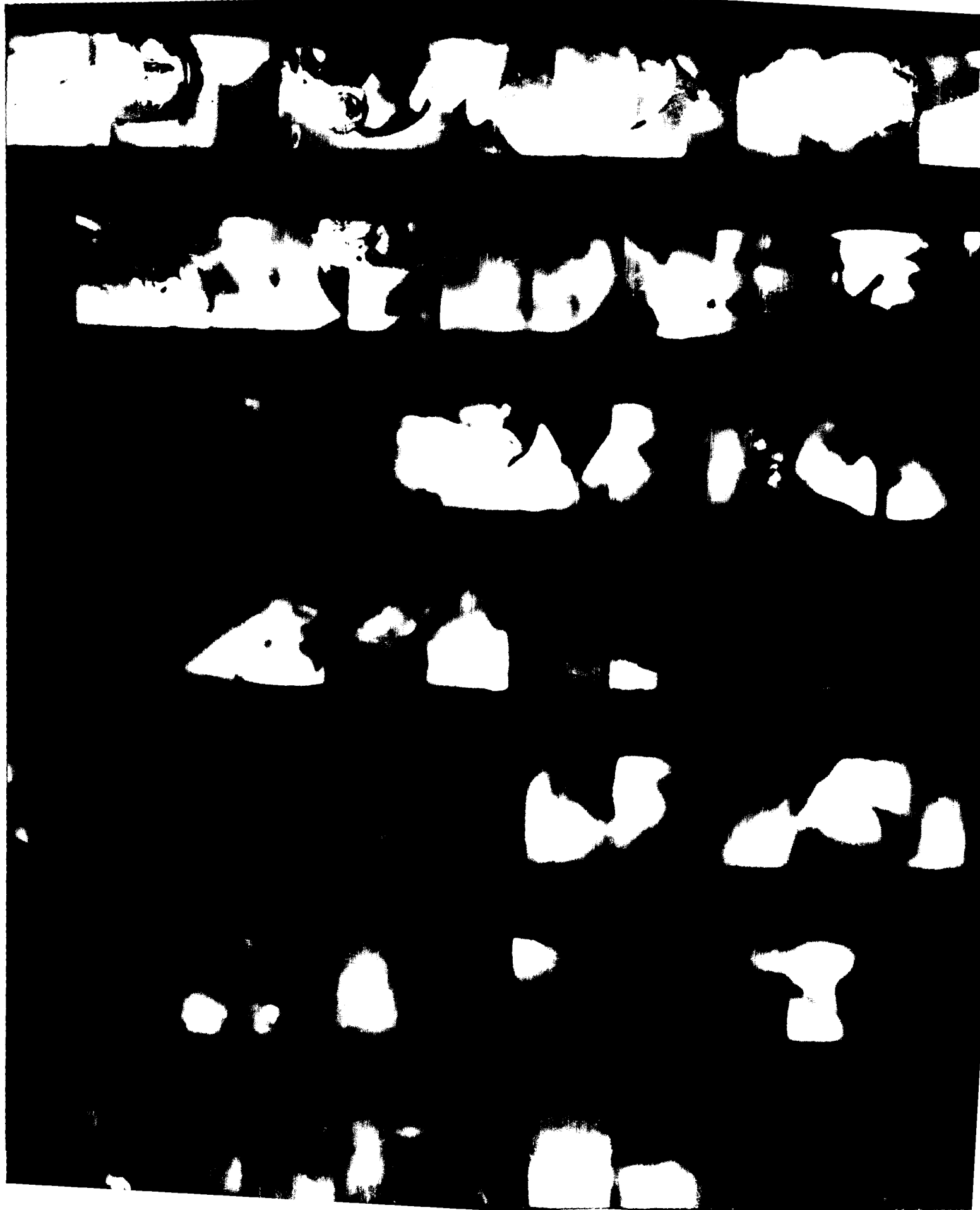
Closing Reception

April 18, 2-4pm

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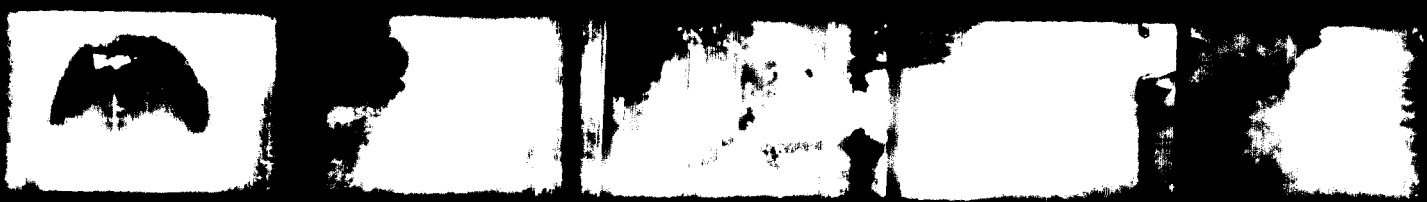












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Special thanks to Aimee Bott for her encouragement and creative input. Your criticism and support have been invaluable. Thanks also to Jenn Anderson for your constant support in all my efforts, and especially for your help with hanging the show and with the reception.